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Those Wintertime Fish

by Terry Rudnick

Winter has arrived, and the fishing tackle is stored safely away in the back of a closet somewhere, waiting to be put to use again in April. If that sounds like your story, you're missing out on a lot of fun, because the state of Washington offers some excellent wintertime fishing opportunities. Whether you happen to live west of the Cascades or on the east side of the state, there are game fish to be caught now. Nearly every species of freshwater fish in Washington can be caught during the winter, but there are four species that are especially cooperative this time of year. The winter-run steelhead, mountain whitefish, yellow perch and walleye are the "Big Four" of wintertime angling, and you can catch all of them right now.

Winter Steelhead

The winter-run steelhead is considered by many to be *THE* winter game fish. It brings serious anglers out of hibernation even on the coldest, wettest, nastiest winter mornings, and the miserable conditions are forgotten the instant one of these big, sea-going rainbow trout decides to strike.

Winter steelhead fishing is primarily a west-side phenomenon, attracting thousands of anglers to the tributary streams of the lower Columbia, Puget Sound, the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the Pacific coast from early December through March, when a bulk of the adult steelhead return from their ocean odyssey.

What rivers are best? Well, that can change from week to week or even from day to day, depending on a wide range of conditions. But there are some trends, and they provide a pretty good idea of where to start looking for steelhead action. Sport-catch records, compiled from returned steelhead punchcards, show that southwest Washington's Cowlitz River was the top winter steelie stream last season, with a catch of 6,833 fish. Last season

Photo by Terry Rudnick





was the 12th in 14 years that the Cowlitz topped the list, so it's always a good bet.

The same sport-catch records that made the Cowlitz number one showed that the Green River, south of Seattle, was the runner-up steelhead stream in terms of sport catches. Third-best was southwest Washington's Elochoman River, followed by the Snoqualmie, Skykomish, East Fork of the Lewis, Tokul Creek, Bogachiel, Puyallup and Sol Duc rivers. The number 11 through 20 winter steelhead producers were the Washougal, Hoh, Kalama, Skagit, North Fork Lewis, Elwah, Nisqually, Humptulips, Willapa and Snohomish rivers. A close look at a map will show you that these top steelhead rivers are scattered all over western Washington, so anglers living almost anywhere west of the Cascades can find good fishing close to home.

There are several ways to catch a steelhead, and one of the more popular methods is a form of stillfishing commonly referred to as "plunking." Put simply, plunking consists of anchoring a bait or lure near the river bottom with several ounces of lead and waiting for a steelhead to come along and take the offering. Patience is the key attribute of the successful plunker, but it's also important to know the habits of the fish and the makeup of the river so that you put that bait or lure in a place where a steelhead is most likely to find it.

The second steelhead-fishing method is known as drift-fishing, and it's more popular than plunking. The drift-fisherman goes to the fish rather than waiting for them to come to him. As the name implies, the drift-fisherman lets the river's current carry his bait or lure through the likely looking stretches of water until it passes in front of a cooperative fish. Unlike the plunker, the drift-fisherman uses enough weight on his line to keep the offering near bottom, but not enough weight to hold it in one place. Drift-fishermen stay on the move, working their way through the holes and drifts, casting here and there until they locate fish.

All veteran steelhead anglers have their own preferences when it comes to tackle, but most use spinning or casting rods of 7 1/2 to 8 1/2 feet long with reels large enough to hold at least 150 yards of 10- to 17-pound

monofilament line. The rods should be sensitive enough to detect the often-subtle strike of a steelhead, but strong enough to land fish that average six to eight pounds and often weigh 10 to 20 pounds.

As for terminal tackle, plunkers will need a good supply of pyramid sinkers weighing four to 16 ounces, several dozen hooks in the size 1 to 4/0 range, some three-way swivels, leader material just a little lighter than the line on their reels and an assortment of baits and lures. Fresh salmon or steelhead egg "clusters" are the top bait, and one of the top plunking lures is a brightly colored little number with white latex wings known as a Spin 'N' Glo.

Drift-fishermen prefer 1/4-inch or 3/16-inch lead wire for use as sinker material. The lead is cut into short lengths of various sizes to get the right sinker weight, and is attached to the line by use of a short piece of surgical tubing. Drift-fishermen prefer hooks ranging from size 1 to size 2/0, and they bait those hooks with the same egg clusters used by plunkers. Fresh ghost shrimp is another top bait. Some anglers prefer to use little tufts of fluorescent yarn on their hooks, while others like the small, buoyant "bobbies" that are available in a variety of colors, sizes and styles.

While plunkers will usually keep all their steelhead gear in a tacklebox, the more mobile drift-fisherman usually carries his tackle in a fishing vest or coat pocket.

Anglers caught nearly 70,000 winter steelhead from over 100 rivers and creeks last season, so it's easy to see that there are plenty of good fishing opportunities, even for the angler who has never tried it before. If you're among those who haven't tried steelheading, give it a whirl this winter.

Mountain Whitefish

The next three months offers the best mountain whitefish opportunity of the entire year. These silvery fish with the tiny mouths are beginning to congregate in preparation for spawning later in the winter, and the angler who finds a pool full of them is in for a real fishing treat.

There are two species of whitefish found in Washington, and the mountain whitefish is the smaller of the two, averaging 11 to 14 inches in length and weighing about half a pound. But they aren't all that small! Last winter, Steven Becken of Prosser hauled a huge whitefish of over five pounds out of the Columbia River, and that fish has been recognized as a world record for the species.

Whitefish inhabit dozens of streams throughout the state, and they're plentiful on both sides of the Cascades. Some of the top east-side whitefish rivers include the Kettle, Spokane, Columbia above Tri-Cities, Methow, Yakima, Naches and Wenatchee. The Klickitat River in south-central Washington is a steady whitefish producer. West of the mountains, virtually all rivers have good whitefish populations, but these eager little scrappers are usually overlooked by anglers more interested in catching the more glamorous winter steelhead.

Like steelhead, the mountain whitefish is usually found right on or near the river bottom, but don't think you can catch them on steelhead tackle. The fish's extremely small mouth makes it very tough to hook them on standard baits and lures. Use maggots, small pieces of worm, tiny grubs or stonefly larvae—commonly called hellgrammites—for bait, and thread these offerings onto short-shanked hooks in sizes 10 to 14.

Yellow Perch

Mountain whitefish and steelhead are found in moving water, but don't think you have to confine your winter fishing efforts only to rivers and creeks. There are perch out there to be caught, and you'll find them in lakes and reservoirs throughout the state.

Perch aren't big, and they certainly don't have much of a reputation as hard fighters, but they're abundant and they taste great, two qualities that endear them to thousands of Washington anglers. Those anglers don't stop fishing when winter arrives, because there are plenty of places to catch perch this time of year, and this is when they're prime for eating, firm and flavorful.

Whether you fish through the eastern Washington ice or do your perch fishing on a year-round lake west of the Cascades, there are a couple of keys to catching wintertime perch. First, fish near bottom, because that's where you're most likely to find the perch when the water is cold. Secondly, pay close attention to detect the often-light strike of a wintertime perch. And, perhaps most importantly, once you find a fish, stay with that spot.

Yellow perch like natural bait a lot better than they like artificial lures, so try worms, nightcrawlers and the eyes of other perch to catch them.

Where do you start looking? There are lots of year-round lakes and lakes that have special winter seasons offering good winter perch fishing. On the west side, Lake Washington comes to mind right away, as does Silver Lake in southwest Washington. On the east side, try Potholes Reservoir, Lind Coulee Wasteway, Banks Lake, Long Lake Reservoir, Scootenay Reservoir, Eloika Lake and Lake Billy Clapp. In addition to these, many of the waters listed as open year-round in the current "Game Fish Seasons and Catch Limits" pamphlet provide good winter perch fishing.

Walleye

The walleye is one of the newest additions to Washington's wintertime fishing menu. No one is sure where they came from, but about 20 years ago, walleyes started to show in the catch from Banks Lake and Lake Roosevelt, and now they're found throughout most of Washington's Columbia River system.

Like their close relative, the perch, walleyes can be caught year-round in the Evergreen State, but they're at their sweet-eating best during the winter. But also like the perch, they can be quite sluggish in the cold waters of winter, so you have to fish slowly, near the bottom, and be on the alert for light strikes.

Your favorite trout, bass or steelhead rods and reels will handle walleyes nicely. Most of the fish you'll catch will weigh under three pounds, but the Columbia system has more than its share of trophies over 10 pounds.

As for the best baits and lures for

winter walleye fishing, some experts advise: "Use any lure you want, as long as there's a night crawler on it," and that's sound advice. Leadhead jigs, weight-forward spinners and red-and-white spoons account for lots of walleyes, and all are fished with a big, juicy 'crawler draped over the hooks.

The best wintertime walleye fishing is found below several of the big hydroelectric dams on the Columbia. Grand Coulee, Wells, Rocky Reach, Chief Joseph, McNary and John Day

dams are favorite spots. Besides the dams, there are other places that may produce walleyes for the cold-weather angler. Lake Roosevelt is a good bet, as is Soda Lake in Grant County.

Now that you know of at least four species of game fish just waiting out there for you, what's your excuse for ignoring wintertime fishing? Take that fishing tackle out of the closet, climb into some warm clothes and hit the road. There are cold-weather fish to be caught. □

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